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Providence housing: a downtown trend that deserves attention

Chester Smolski

One of the major needs in Rhode Island, as it is in much of the country, is decent and safe housing in a good environment. This need is especially acute for the elderly population.

The elderly are normally concentrated in our cities and make up a larger proportion of the population there than in the smaller communities. For instance, they comprise approximately 15 percent of the Providence populace, whereas they represent less than four percent of the Middletown population. And it is in our cities that provision of housing for the numerous elderly poses some of the real challenges.

Consider the case of Providence. Currently there are 433 elderly in need of low cost housing registered with the local housing authority. Based on present placement activities, it will take up to two years to house these people, but past experience indicates that the number of elderly increases at a faster rate than does the number of available housing units. So the need will continue and likely grow.

Associated with the need to provide housing for the low income elderly is the location of this housing. A proposed elderly housing project located in Fox Point close to Route 195 was rejected by HUD because of automobile noise; another complex in the western part of the city was stopped because of citizen protests against taking land from Neutaconkanut Park; and, most recently, high rise structures for the elderly were questioned because they would impinge on the view from Roger Williams Park.

It would appear from such neighborhood

siting difficulties that housing for the elderly might better be built in the Providence downtown where many units have already been built and where few objections have been raised. Such is not the case.

Almost all residential units in the downtown are located in the Weybosset Hill area. The recently completed 100 unit Cathedral Apartments, in addition to the Dexter Manor, the refurbished YWCA, and the more than two-thirds elderly occupancy of Beneficent House mean that

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almost one-half of the units in the Providence downtown are occupied by the elderly. If the three more anticipated projects for the elderly in the Weybosset area are completed, housing will approach two of every three units.

Housing for the elderly is in short supply but questions need to be raised about its location in the downtown: 1. Most important, do the elderly really want to live in the downtown rather than in the neighborhoods from which they came? 2. Do city centers have vitality if there is too great a concentration of people who seldom venture out into the street at night? 3. Does a preponderance of the elderly mean that downtown services, such as centers for the elderly, are directed solely to this age group rather than the entire population? 4.

What does subsidized housing constructed on the most valuable land in the city contribute to the tax base? A strong case can be made for locating elderly housing in the neighborhoods, places where a sense of community exists rather than the anonymity of a downtown. The elderly have a strong bias against moving and changing communities, so greater efforts should be made to provide housing for them in neighborhoods where they have previously lived and with which they are familiar, even though there are problems with finding the best location in the neighborhoods with access to services and transportation.

The most recent city-approved housing for the elderly will soon appear in the Cathedral Square area. Although this 100 unit, eight-story structure may not compete with the towers of the Cathedral of SS. Peter and Paul, it will add more of the same type housing to the only residential area in the downtown.

In other countries where there is a great concern for the needs of the elderly, it is interesting to note that housing for the elderly is not placed in the centers of the new cities which have been built over the past 30 years. Rather, housing for the elderly is located in the neighborhoods so that these residents become part of the community rather than suffering the isolation of a town center location.

We need to give careful attention to the future location of housing for the elderly. Expedient response to need and availability of land in the downtown that can be used for elderly housing is not the way to determine housing sites, does not answer the needs of the elderly, and is questionable as a means to working for a revitalized downtown.

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